DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 626 TM 830 477

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TITLE Linking Testing and Evaluation with School District Instructional Programs.
PUB DATE [82]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; *Achievement Gains; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; *Instructional Improvement; Minimum Competencies; Program Evaluation; Program Implementation; *Standardized Tests; *Test Use
IDENTIFIERS *Clark County School District NV

ABSTRACT

This paper describes and evaluates a comprehensive school and instructional management system developed and implemented in one of the nation's largest and fastest growing school districts. Since implementing the system, standardized achievement scores have increased an average 20 percentile points. The system has components to: (1) clearly set forth objectives; (2) measure current achievement of each objective; and (3) reduce the difference between what is and what should be. Objectives provided for by the system range from specific math skills for kindergarten to goals for individual schools and performance objectives for individual staff members. The means of measurement and evaluation include standardized tests, custom criterion-referenced tests, standards and instruments for observing, and measures of feedback regarding what is, compared to what should be. (Author/PN)

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LINKING TESTING AND EVALUATION WITH SCHOOL DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS

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The Clark County School District was created in 1956 as part of a legislated reorganization to consolidate all of the school districts in the entire state of Nevada into seventeen districts -- one for each county. Since its creation the district grew from 20,000 students in 1956 to approximately 90,000 in 1982. The minority enrollment typically comprises 25% of the total. In 1979 the state legislature enacted an extensive property tax cut and placed stringent restrictions on public agency spending and revenues. In 1981 the state legislature dramatically shifted the revenue base from real property taxes to retail sales taxes. The major national recession which began in 1981 dramatically demonstrated that this "tax shift" from real property to sales tax placed Nevada school finance at the mercy of economic ups and downs for the first time. In 1982 a seventy million dollar school construction bond was defeated marking the first time the district had lost a bond election.

Tax revolts, tax shifts, a defeated bond referendum and a major recession all served to strain the relationship between the community and the schools and confirm the value of an instructional management system that allows teachers, administrators and board members to demonstrate accountability for acceptable student achievement.

Genesis of a Data-Based Instructional Improvement Movement

In 1969 and 1970 a few central office administrators became increasingly uncomfortable with test scores and instructional inconsistencies. Year after year the norm-referenced test results were below the mean and, in some grades, certain major subtests yielded percentile scores in the twenties and thirties. Initially, low scores were rationalized by statements such as "Those tests don't measure what we teach," or "The norms don't fit our district," or "You can't accurately measure school effectiveness where student transiency is so high." There were also concerns about gross inconsistencies in curriculum and measured achievement from school to school.

At that time, concern for student achievement was kept in the forefront through critical writers and legislation mandating minimum proficiency and demonstrated accountability in neighboring states. Also, at that time, a district administrative reorganization aimed at centralization placed the total supervision of all schools under two assistant superintendents -- one for elementary and one for secondary. Thus with the need demonstrated and the organizational structure put in place, the stage was set for a major thrust toward data-based instructional improvement.

Shape and Direction of the Movement

The assistant superintendent for elementary education, encouraged and assisted by certain other administrators, assumed the leadership for the design and implementation of a comprehensive system for instructional management and improvement beginning in 1970. It was determined that in light of the rapidly changing demographic composition of the district, any significant and lasting improvement would have to be centrally developed and directed. While the system's design and programs were not mandated by the superintendent or the board of school trustees, so long as too many feathers were not ruffled nor too many financial demands made, they were usually supportive. At one point, as some principals began to feel uncomfortable with the demands for change and accountability and as they visited with the superintendent, they asked him for relief. Initially he sympathized with them, but as he was made more fully aware of the system's potential he became a staunch supporter.

After approximately seven years of development and utilization in the district's elementary schools, in 1978 a new superintendent directed that the system be adapted for and implemented to a limited degree in the secondary schools. This required considerably less development time because a model was in place and operating. However, that superintendent resigned in 1981 and the extent of secondary development and implementation became uncertain.

From the beginning certain assumptions about curriculum, evaluation, staff development, management and school administration and the role of educational research provided continuity of approach and design. As the movement extended in years and people, these assumptions became increasingly important. Perhaps the three most basic and far-reaching assumptions were:

1. Goals and objectives need to be clearly written and widely communicated.

2. Means must be provided and used to assess the degree to which objectives are attained.

3. All assessment should culminate in program improvement decisions.

It was always assumed that each component of the overall school and instructional management system would be designed to fit into and facilitate one or more of the above three basic assumptions. Those three came to be expressed commonly as "What should be," "What is," and "How to reduce the difference." It was also assumed that the probability of objectives being attained would be greatly increased if each individual were held accountable through a modified management by objectives and results approach.

Some of the other assumptions that were made consistently were as follows:

1. Curriculum guides should be developed in district and should define the specifics of curriculum content through learner behavior objectives for each subject.

2. Effective instruction does have research verified characteristics and instructional programs and teacher performance can be evaluated objectively.

3. Teacher effectiveness can be improved through skilled supervision and relevant staff development.

4. The principal can play a key role as an instructional leader within a school and will effectively fill this role if given the skills, motivation and direction to do so.

Instructional Management System Design

The system has three major components or subsystems. The first component consists of goals, objectives, and evaluative criteria ("What should be"). These range in scope and specificity from a simple math skill in the kindergarten curriculum guide to annual priority goals adopted by the superintendent and the board of school trustees. At the school level the heart of this component is a set of objectives and standards for school operation known as Elements of Quality.

These ten basic Elements of Quality (listed below) have become widely accepted and are commonly used as criteria for planning for and evaluating instruction. Each of the ten elements (an eleventh was added for student activities for secondary schools) has subobjectives or specific evaluative criteria. These specific criteria serve as guides for curricular and instructional planning and both self and program evaluation. The first five also serve as a set of observable criteria to guide principals in evaluating teacher performance. All of the elements are used by principals in making an annual assessment of their school (note Element 6) and by the supervisors of principals in making an annual evaluation of each principal's performance.

Clark County School District
ELEMENTS OF QUALITY FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Note: For brevity, the subobjectives and evaluative criteria have either been omitted or printed in abstracted form.

1. Curriculum guides serve as the basis for classroom instruction. Lesson objectives and learning activities are planned in accordance with specified skills and concepts contained in Clark County School District curriculum guides. Content of textbooks, etc., is used

selectively to teach and reinforce skills and concepts specified in curriculum guides.

2. Student achievement is commensurate with ability or other established expectancies.

3. Individual differences in the educational needs of students are identified and appropriately met.

The learning needs of students are assessed in relation to established objectives. Students are grouped for instruction according to assessed needs. Instruction is adjusted to student learning rates. Opportunities are provided for students to use their most effective ways of learning. Learning progress is monitored and recorded.

4. Provision is made for the social and emotional development of students. Positive direction and reinforcement are the primary means for motivating students. Students respond positively to teacher model and direction. Students remain attentive to their work. Students display positive behavior when interacting with each other. Students are provided opportunities to initiate, direct, and evaluate some of their own learning activities. Student talk and movement are appropriate for the learning activity.

5. Instructional methods are consistent with established objectives and proven principles of learning.

The teacher sets a positive climate for learning (stimulates student excitement, anticipation, curiosity, etc.). The teacher clearly communicates lesson objectives and their importance to students. The teaching activities are appropriate for concept, skill or positive behavior lesson objectives. The teacher clearly communicates directions for followup activities. Teacher questioning strategies (questions, responses, reaction) facilitate the development of thinking skills (literal, interpretative and critical). Resources are appropriately used for achieving lesson objectives. The physical environment of the classroom is well organized and designed by the teacher to enhance, stimulate and extend learning.

6. A management system providing for needs assessment, priority objectives and plans, monitoring and evaluation by results is effectively used by the principal and teachers.

Principals are involved and involve their staff members individually in a structured assessment, priority setting, planning, evaluating and reporting process for

improving performance results in relation to established criteria.

7. Personnel management procedures prescribed by law, regulation, and contract are effectively administered by the principal.

The principal makes (and records as appropriate) frequent visits to classrooms to directly observe the instructional program and holds individual conferences with teachers as needed to discuss their priority objectives and plans, their progress toward objectives, needed change and assistance, and overall performance and results.

8. Staff effectiveness is promoted by the principal through proper application of proven principles of leadership and management.

The principal provides for staff involvement, promotes an open climate, provides training and assistance as needed, reinforces good performance of the staff, and accurately assesses and appropriately responds to measured faculty opinion regarding the operation of the school.

9. Community confidence in the school is established and maintained. Parents are kept well informed regarding the school, its objectives, programs and procedures, are provided convenient means to express their opinion and suggestions regarding the school, are kept well informed regarding their child's school program and progress, and are provided means to be involved at the school and supportive of its objectives and programs.

10. Management organization and procedures for the school are clearly written, effective and consistent with the established procedures and regulations of the district.

Necessary and standard school regulations and management procedures are clearly written in a staff handbook, provision is made by the principal to monitor and evaluate the management functions of the school to identify exceptions to established standards and procedures and to appropriately deal with management exceptions.

A second component consists of both formative and summative measures of the extent that objectives are achieved ("What is"). Norm-referenced (nationally standardized) tests are administered in grades three, six, eight and eleven. Locally developed criterion referenced tests are used in reading and math in three modes. One CRT form is used as a general placement test generally at the beginning of the school year. Another CRT form is a

series of specific diagnostic instruments used to identify specific learning needs for individual students. The other CRT form is an end-of-year measure of mastery of specific instructional objectives. Other measures of "What is" include structured surveys of parents, student, teacher and principal opinions and recorded direct observations of instructional personnel and student behavior utilizing specific observable criteria growing out of the Elements of Quality. The opinion surveys are machine-scored and by computer processing school personnel are provided data through printouts keyed to the Elements of Quality.

The third major component of the system directly addresses the challenge of data-based instructional improvement ("Reducing the difference" between what should be and what is). This component includes a framework for goal setting, priority planning, monitoring and staff development. Utilizing the data base provided by comparing "What is" with "What should be," each level of the district organization from teacher to superintendent and school board selects as priorities for change a limited number of objectives which are realistically attainable and offer the greatest probability for instructional improvement. Each of these priorities is written in a universal format to promote simplicity and common understanding. The format includes statements of identified need, objectives, activities to achieve the objectives, the means for evaluation, the person(s) responsible and finally a statement of evaluation added at the end of the annual cycle. To encourage the selection of significant priorities, a direct relationship between achieving personal priority objectives and personnel performance evaluation is carefully avoided.

Results

Standardized test results have clearly shown that the district's efforts to improve measured student achievement were effective. Elementary achievement at both the primary and intermediate grade levels increased approximately twenty percentile points over a period of seven to ten years from 1970. For example, the sixth grade total reading and math percentile scores had increased from 42 and 38 in 1970-71 to 60 and 64 in 1981-82. The second grade reading and math percentile scores had increased from 50 in 1970-71 to 71 and 76 by 1976-77. In 1978 standardized testing was moved from second to third grade where in 1981-82 the total reading percentile was 64 and math was 71.

Since the secondary schools did not begin to utilize a comparable instructional management system until later, direct comparisons between elementary and secondary are not so meaningful. However, it is reasonable to assume that elementary students would carry some of their higher achievement into the secondary grades. The eighth grade reading and math percentile scores increased from 40 and 36 in 1975-76 to 59 and 65 in 1981-82 and the eleventh grade increased to 53 and 57 by 1981-82.

The results of district-developed criterion referenced measures

of elementary student proficiency have been used to group students within a class for instruction, to diagnose individual student learning needs and to evaluate instructional programs in terms of student mastery of instructional objectives. Care has been taken to avoid using the criterion referenced placement and diagnostic tests as measures of student performance for direct evaluation of staff. Machine-scoring of placement and end-of-year criterion referenced tests has permitted printouts to individual teachers and principals. These printouts provide extensive analysis of data by student, classroom (teacher), grade, school, and district.

An analysis of the responses to elementary teacher and parent opinion surveys which are criterion referenced to the Elements of Quality reveals certain attitude patterns that have been consistently positive for several years. Teachers and parents respond to each item in the survey instrument on a five-point Likert-type scale. The weighted point scores could range from a low of 1.00 (strongly disagree) to a high of 5.00 (strongly agree). From 1978-79 to 1981-82 the mean weighted response on the teacher instrument increased from 3.36 to 3.46 for Elements 6 through 10. The mean weighted response on the parent survey remained very stable, but high with a mean of 4.36 in 1978-79 and 4.37 in 1981-82. Certain items on each survey have special significance. For example, on the parent survey, "The teachers use effective methods and materials to help my child learn" yielded 4.46 in 1978-79 and 4.47 in 1981-82 with an average 14,000 parents responding representing all of the seventy-one elementary schools. Two of the most significant items on the teacher survey were "My teaching performance is accurately assessed relative to district-established criteria" (3.51 in 1978-79 and 3.55 in 1981-82) and "The principal's supervision of my classroom performance results in improved instruction" (3.29 in 1978-79 and 3.44 in 1981-82). An average of 1,950 teachers responded, which was nearly 100% of the total number of elementary teachers on staff.

One of the challenges of a highly structured and centralized instructional management and accountability system such as the one in Clark County is managing the affective response of teachers. The teacher opinion survey is used annually to allow individual principals and district administrators to monitor the attitudes and feelings of teachers. Both the teacher and parent surveys are administered in a manner to encourage objectivity through anonymity of respondents. Since each item in the survey instruments (thirty-five for teachers and fifteen for parents) is a clear statement of a desirable condition or objective to be achieved, they represent a directing force as well as a means to measure attitudes.

A Unique Feature

A very significant and somewhat unique characteristic of the Clark County experience deserves special consideration. Many top level Clark County administrators believe that it is the single

most vital difference between what might have been a passing experiment of limited impact and one that has endured and has had a profound influence in dramatically reshaping the instructional program of a very large school district. The management of all instructional improvement efforts was deliberately linked with the overall direct management of schools. The following examples will serve to illustrate this point.

When one independent department was responsible for developing curriculum and others were responsible for implementation, the use of curriculum guides was considered to be optional and many principals and teachers did not take them seriously. However, when key line administrators assumed responsibility for the development, implementation and success of the curriculum, a new standard was set. One of the criteria used to evaluate the performance of principals and teachers was the extent that curriculum guides were used as a basis for instruction (see Element of Quality No. 1). A uniform curriculum became a reality.

Prior to the early 1970's, test scores were not taken seriously except by a few people and mostly by the central office staff responsible for testing and evaluation. However, when the comprehensive school and instructional management system was developed, acceptable test scores became one of the criteria not only for evaluating instructional programs, but also for evaluating the performance of instructional personnel (see Element of Quality No. 2). Here an important distinction was attempted. An adage was coined that "When tests are used as weapons of supervision rather than tools of instructional improvement, they soon become useless for either purpose." Rather than an individual's effectiveness being evaluated upon reaching a norm or an absolute standard, they were evaluated upon showing needed or significant improvement. This permitted teachers and principals in traditionally low achieving areas to be winners and it required those who happened to be in traditionally high achieving areas to do more than exceed the District means. It was reasoned that if the bottom line of the school business is student achievement those who control the day to day operation of the business should be directly accountable for the bottom line.

It was determined that principals and their direct supervisors would be the first line instructional leaders. They would plan and conduct or direct staff development for themselves and teachers. They would be involved in curriculum development and all curriculum implementation and instructional improvement programs would flow through them.

Challenges and Recommendations

In a continuing sequence of development, implementation and refinement since 1969, the aspect of the system which currently offers the greatest challenge and promise is staff development. For example, considering the classroom teacher and school principal we can now describe quite well the characteristics of good

performance ("What should be") and with considerable accuracy assess the performance of a given individual ("What is"), but both lack utility unless they lead to increased individual skill and motivation. An additional challenge of a highly structured system is providing for upgrading and renewal of all the components to ensure that it is dynamic and relevant.

Certain recommendations seem to be appropriate for others who might consider utilizing any part of the Clark County system or experience. It is important to assess the philosophy or assumptions of key leaders to ensure that there is compatibility with goals and approaches that are developed. Objectives are most basic and should be clearly written for all levels of the organization and generally accepted by those responsible for attainment. There are clear time advantages of adapting existing models where they can be found rather than starting with nothing. Formal endorsement and support from the superintendent and the board of trustees is ultimately necessary and should be sought early. Heavy involvement in design and development by those staff most directly affected helps to ensure acceptance and commitment.